DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 423 CS 505 024

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TITLE Assessing College-Level Communicating Skills.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Fine Arts; Higher Education; Natural Sciences; Role Playing; Social Sciences; Speech Skills; *Student Evaluation; *Testing Programs; *Test Validity; Writing Evaluation; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS American College Testing Program

ABSTRACT

In 1976, the American College Testing Program (ACT) organized the College Outcome Measures Project (COMP) to design, develop, validate, and implement assessment materials for measuring the knowledge and skills that are expected of general education college graduates and that are important to functioning effectively in adult society. The Composite Exam is one instrument developed to assess the areas of the project, which include communicating, problem solving, and using science and technology and the arts. This exam broadly defines communicating as the ability to send and receive information in a variety of modes, within a variety of settings, and for a variety of purposes. As the contexts for communication tasks, three written, three audiotaped, and one videotaped stimuli are used in each of three content areas. The COMP speaking assessment is composed of three role playing tasks using printed stimulus material in the social sciences, natural sciences, and the arts, plus a reproduction of a painting in the latter area. The COMP writing assessment is composed of three role playing tasks using audiotaped stimuli in the social sciences, natural sciences, and the arts, which require a total of 60 minutes of writing to compose three written communications directed to various audiences. The development of the COMP assessments raised issues of validity in terms of content, sensitivity to the levels of speaking and writing proficiency acquired normally by undergraduate students, and the importance of communicating to effective functioning in a variety of adult roles. Longitudinal studies are in progress to determine whether the Communicating Assessment and other COMP measures are predictive of effective functioning in various roles. (HTH)

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Assessing College-Level Communicating Skills

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Joe M. Steele
The American College Testing Program

In 1976 the American College Testing Program (ACT) organized the College Outcome Measures Project (COMP) to design, develop, validate, and implement assessment materials to measure the knowledge and skills (1) that undergraduate students are expected to acquire as a result of general education programs, and (2) that are important to effective functioning in adult society. The areas upon which the project focuses are: Communicating, Solving Problems, Clarifying Values, Functioning within Social Institutions, Using Science and Technology, and Using the Arts.

One instrument developed to assess these areas is the Composite Examination. Questions in the Composite Examination are based on television documentaries, recent magazine articles, ads, short stories, art prints, music, discussions, and newscasts. Participants view these materials and then respond with short written answers, some longer essays in the form of letters, some oral responses, which are audiotaped, and also some multiple choice items.

Assessing Communicating Skills and Knowledge

In the Composite Examination Communicating is defined broadly as the ability to send and receive information in a variety of modes (written, graphic, oral, numeric, and symbolic), within a variety of settings (one-to-one, in small and large groups), and for a variety of purposes (for example, to inform, to understand, to persuade, and to analyze). Considerable effort has been made to develop an instrument that is content-fair. One must communicate about something, and some people are more knowledgeable in some

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content areas than in others. To be fair, an assessment of communicating should cover a broad scope of content. In COMP instruments Communicating is defined as the ability to communicate about social institutions, science and technology, and the arts. As the contexts for communicating tasks, three written, one audio-taped and one videotaped stimulus are used in each of the three content areas. Topics for communicating about social institutions include governmental agencies, the economy, the family, employment, and volunteer organizations. Technological topics include transportation, housing, energy, food production, and health. Artistic topics include short stories, architecture, music, drama, and painting. The rating procedures require the efforts of evaluators expert in each of the three content areas as well as experts in written and oral communication.

The resulting Communicating score represents a summed judgement of the respondents' ability to read, write, listen, speak and receive and send information using graphic and numeric representations.

Besides a Communicating score, specific subscores are produced for Writing and Speaking.

Speaking Assessment

The COMP Speaking Assessment is composed of three role-playing tasks using printed stimulus material in the social sciences, natural sciences, and the arts, plus in the latter area a reproduction of a painting.

Examinees have 24 hours or more to prepare a 3 minute oral response to each of the three tasks. Alternate forms equated in difficulty are available. In Form III, Task 1, the respondent reads about a community group concerned about vandalism and as spokesperson for a group of those attending the meetings, prepares a speech to the group about how they could better achieve their purpose. In Task 2, the respondent attempts to explain the importance

of CPR training to a friend and convince that person that the two of them should take CPR training. In Task 3, the respondent views a reproduction of a painting and reads a role playing task that involves speaking to a bank's advisory committee about displaying this work of art in the bank. By taping in a language lab, groups of students can be taped simultaneously.

The evaluation procedure used to score these samples of speaking requires that a person expert in oral communication apply qualitative rating scales that define five levels of proficiency on three broad criteria to each of the three speaking samples for each student.

The evaluation task calls for a judgment of the degree to which the communicator establishes a human relationship with the intended audience and structures a discourse that addresses the points called for in a fluent and poised way. The overriding guideline for the judgment is the degree to which the response represents effective speaking for an adult engaged in this social role.

Writing Assessment

The COMP Writing Assessment is composed of three role-playing tasks using audio-taped stimuli in the content areas of social sciences, natural sciences and the arts, which require a total of 60 minutes of writing to compose three written communications directed to various audiences. The rating procedure used to score these writing samples requires that a person expert in written communication (e.g. college-level English faculty) apply qualitative rating scales that define five levels of proficiency on three broad criteria to each of the three writing samples for each student. Guidelines are provided to minimize various sources of bias in rating.

For each task, respondents have twenty minutes in which to prepare their written communication to specified audiences. In Form III, Task 1,

the respondent listens to a taped family discussion about marriage and then writes a personal letter to a close friend that explains and reflects on reasons for marrying, ways one's family might differ and changes in society affecting ideas about the family. In Task 2, the respondent listens to a taped newscast on coal gasification and then writes a persuasive letter to a U.S. Senator reacting to the newscast and suggesting government support for this approach. In Task 3, the respondent listens to a tape of music and then writes a memorandum to a radio programming director endorsing continued airing of this type of music. Thw writer's role is that of a spokesperson for a Citizen's Advisory Committee for public radio.

The evaluation task calls for a judgment of each writing sample of the degree to which the communicator addresses the intended audience, develops and organizes the points called for in the role-playing situation, and makes skillful use of language. The overriding guideline for the judgment is the degree to which the response represents effective writing for an adult engaged in this social role.

Role playing tasks were judged to be especially appropriate for the speaking and writing assignments. As adults we are often called upon to adopt roles that we haven't chosen and with which we may not personally find ourselves entirely in agreement. However, one bit of evidence of effective functioning is the ability to accept such a role and perform responsibly in it. As measures of the outcomes of college, the tasks are demanding, but do not call for specialized information beyond what is reasonable to expect a college student to have acquired.

While content cannot really be separated from the assessment of communicating skills, the COMP rating scales call for as much separation as possible. When used as part of the Composite Examination, separate scales

from Speaking and Writing are used to assess the speeches and essays for relevant information in each of the three content areas of the social sciences, natural sciences, and the arts/humanities. Skills in Solving Problems and Clarifying Values are also assessed by separate scales. Thus the Speaking and Writing evaluators are asked to concentrate on the communicating skills of the respondent rather than the ideas espoused.

Equal emphasis in both speaking and writing assessment is given to rhetorical concerns (discourse or organization), psychological concerns (making contact with and attending to the perspective of the audience), and practical concerns (using vivid language, illustrations, etc. to dramatize and create an effect). Little emphasis is given to formal errors such as mispronounced or misspelled words, pausing or punctuation, etc., unless they noticeably detract from or obscure the message. These criteria are qualitatively scaled, to allow a norm-free judgement of the overall effect of a speech or essay.

Validity Issues

From the beginning, the development of the COMP assessments of speaking and writing involved considerable input from faculty experts in communication at a diverse group of institutions participating in the College Outcome Measures Project. This process assured that the outcomes as defined by the rating scales represented skill expectations which relevant faculty viewed as important and which were held in common by a diverse group of postsecondary institutions. Thus a high content validity for the scales was established.

A second concern related to the validity of the assessment was to assure that it was sensitive to the levels of speaking and writing proficiency acquired by undergraduate students through normal postsecondary activities. Note that this issue related not only to the sensitivity of

the instrument, but to the degree to which the outcomes measured were amenable to instruction. The combined mean rating of seniors at participating institutions was found to be significantly higher than the mean for a comparable reference group of freshmen. Thus, it would appear that the instrument is sensitive to differences in communicating proficiency across groups who would be expected to differ.

A third validity concern was to establish that communicating , as it is assessed by COMP, is important to effective functioning in a variety of relevant roles. As part of a study of successful college graduates at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), data were obtained on levels of communicating. Those graduates identified a priori as effective communicators obtained a mean score significantly higher than college seniors on the COMP communicating scale. One might assume that a sample of college seniors contains some who are (or will be) effective in communication roles and some who are not. Based on this assumption, one would expect a group of experienced adults, selected because of their effective involvement in communication roles, to score higher than college seniors. If the graduates had not scored higher than seniors, the data would have raised a question about the validity of this writing assessment as tapping a dimension important to effective functioning. While the evidence does not prove a necessary relationship, it suggests that communicating as assessed by COMP is important to effective functioning in a variety of adult roles related to communicating.

Another study which sheds light on the validity of the assessment of writing was a study of 46 adults who had worked in business management or criminal justice management in a variety of job settings for 2 to 12 years. All were rated by their supervisors on 16 characteristics relevant to their performance on the job. Multiple regression analysis of these performance

characteristics related to the COMP Writing Assessment yielded a correlation coefficient of .67. The following supervisor ratings were found to be associated with the Writing Assessment: Written Communication Skills, Judgement, Academic Performance, Energy Level, Problem-Solving Skills, Organizational Skills, Oral Communication Skills, Flexibility, and Leadership Potential. Here the multiple R of .67 represents a substantial relationship to effective functioning, given that the supervisor ratings reflect a much broader array of skills than is assessed by the COMP Writing Assessment.

Longitudinal studies are in progress to determine whether the Communicating Assessment and other COMP measures are predictive of effective functioning in various adult roles. In addition, ACT intends to conduct further studies in various job settings to compare performance on COMP to supervisor ratings of performance on the job.

Participating institutions use COMP for a variety of purposes. It is used for program evaluation: Comparisons are made of freshman/senior performance, pre and post measures to verify effectiveness of a specific program, make comparisons of alternative programs, and comparisons with reference group norms. Institutions are also using COMP in accreditation and self studies.

A second use of COMP is to make judgements about placement in or exemption from certain courses. Advising and planning further work is another aspect of this use of COMP.

A third use of COMP is as an exit level examination to verify ability to apply general education skills and knowledge. For example, Our Lady of the Lake University uses the COMP assessment of Communicating as a means of certifying ability of graduates to apply communicating skills at a standard of proficiency set by OLLU. Moreover, OLLU has developed an additional

assessment of social interaction skills. As evidence accumulates of programs that develop high levels of proficiency in communication skills, ACT will attempt to identify special features of these programs that make them especially effective.